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## **SOUTH CHINA SEA: CORE INTEREST EXTRAORDINAIRE.**

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China's powerful Central Military Commission has approved the formal establishment of a military garrison for the disputed South China Sea, the state media has announced, a move which could further boost tensions in already fractious region. This news comes after China established the city of Sansha, on 21 June as a rhetoric to Vietnam's Maritime Law announcement on the same day. Vietnam's Maritime Law which reportedly takes effect early 2013, forms a legal framework to serve the utilisation, management and protection of Vietnam's sea and islands, including the Paracels and Spratlys, as well as the development of sea-borne economy, so as to facilitate it's international integration and boost cooperation with other countries.

Early this month, China sent a flotilla of law enforcement ships to circumnavigate the disputed areas and thereafter, deploying a large fleet of fishing fleet to add resolve to her claims. Chinese vessels were also involved in a stand-off against Philippines and Japan over disputed areas in the respective Seas. Besides the garrison, Sansha, or Woody Island, will have 45 legislators elected to govern the 1,100 people who live on the island groups of the Spratlys, the Paracels and the Macclesfield Bank, known in Chinese as the Xisha, Zhongsha and Nansha islands. The new legislators would also govern 2 million square km of the South China Sea over which China claims jurisdiction. This development does not come as a surprise as China has been consistent with her assertions. Whilst China kept ASEAN busy with negotiations on the Code of Conduct, China has steadily staked her claim in her Core Interest. Being closest to China, Philippines and Vietnam faced the rising tide of China's might. It was interesting to note that in response to China's move, Philippines was no match for China. The only communist country in ASEAN, Vietnam, matched China in almost every move. Both Philippines and Vietnam waited for the 45<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM), hoping to include the recent incidents in the Joint Communiqué. However, the Joint Communiqué could not be issued as some ASEAN members, charmed by China's economy, relented to the dragon's soft power.

The failure to issue a Joint Communiqué exemplified China's astute use of economy as instrument of national power. Cambodia was blamed to be smitten by this charm offensive, however, others too preferred not to rattle the dragon. Even ASEAN's founding fathers faltered, safe for Indonesia's Marty Natalegawa's shuttle diplomacy which resulted later in the adoption of the ASEAN six point principles. It is commendable that Indonesia moved quickly towards damage control. Without this initiative, ASEAN will be seen in tatters, divided in their stance to reach a consensus. Then again, the die is cast, ASEAN reared its ugly head, disunited for the first time since its formation. Is this ASEAN Centrality, ASEAN Way or ASEAN maturing?

China's soft power is similar to American hard power in many ways. The adage, "you are either with me or against me" holds sway as many ASEAN members feel that they should not make any statements which may 'hurt' China. Whatever the case may be, China's stand is plain and simple. ASEAN and the world can have their sentiments for South China Sea, China will never relent. The trend is clear. The vast sea has been designated Core Interest. A city has been named to administer the disputed areas and a military garrison will soon be in place. Chinese supremacy will reign and soon, like it or not, the variety of economic activities will take place; tourism, exploration and exploitation of marine resources. With the change of leadership around the corner, China has to show resilience, the will, and the capability to defend her claims. If

there are claimants who think that the dragon's fiery breath has not reached it, make no mistake, it will reach soon enough. Therefore, it is better to start drawing contingency plans and start making whole government preparations for it. If Vietnam has prepared for it, so can others. One point to ponder is that Taiwan's two islands, Itu Aba and Pratas, have been effectively included in China's claims. Wonder what Taiwan has to say?

Diplomacy is the first instrument of national power besides information, military and economy. China has effectively used economy to stall claimants and ensure they conform to her wishes. Will ASEAN realise that while China's shadow looms over the horizon, the general public of claimants are already questioning their militaries' accountability in safeguarding the sovereignty of national maritime zones. China's brinkmanship in diplomacy has had its effect, in the maxim of Deng Xiaoping, "Hide your strength and bid your time".

In three years, Malaysia will be faced with a major responsibility in International Relations. It would be Malaysia's turn to be the ASEAN Chair. Though Malaysia is at the tail end of the dispute, it will be wise for Malaysia to make plans for contingencies.